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Title: The 'Charlotte Serber Center' named, dedicated Classified library honors first librarian, only female wartime Group leader

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Box:

What is the Charlotte Serber Center?

The Charlotte Serber Center is part of the National Security Research Center, which is the Lab's classified library. It is named in honor of the Lab's first librarian and only female wartime Group Leader.

The Center includes the Classified Reports Collection that Serber started and grew while Los Alamos scientists simultaneously accessed the materials to build the atomic bombs. The Center also includes the Rocky Flats Collection, the Directors' Correspondence Collection, a third of the NSRC's photo/negative collection and more. Additionally, it houses the NSRC's brand new customer service area.

Collections in the Charlotte Serber Center help support today's national security mission work. [Contact](#) the NSRC for research assistance.

Story:

The 'Charlotte Serber Center' named, dedicated

Classified library honors first librarian, only female wartime Group leader

By Riz Ali, Director, [National Security Research Center](#)

As our Lab was being created nearly 80 years, J. Robert Oppenheimer handpicked Charlotte Serber for what he considered one of the most critical positions: to oversee the wartime technical library.

Today, serving as the director of the National Security Research Center (NSRC), I can attest to both the importance of Oppie's pick and affirm that he made the right choice. The NSRC is the Lab's classified library and we've evolved from that inaugural wartime technical library. Thanks to Serber, those materials remain a vital part of our collections today.

Her job wasn't easy.

Serber faced two significant obstacles: She did not have extensive formal training or experience as a librarian. And, this library did not actually exist yet.

Regardless, in just two years' time, as Los Alamos scientists raced to secretly create the atomic bomb and help end history's deadliest war, Serber built and managed a classified technical reports library that Oppenheimer and his team relied upon for scientific success.

Oppenheimer himself commended Serber back then, and the NSRC commends her today. She was a remarkable person and critical to the success of the Manhattan Project. It's only fitting to honor her during Women's History Month.

In honor of her contributions to the Lab, the NSRC staff and I gathered with Lab leadership last week to dedicate the room that houses the Center's Classified Reports Collection, originally started by Serber. This room contains hundreds of thousands of classified materials, including documents, photos, handwritten notebooks, as well as the entire Rocky Flats Collection (actinide research and development data). These materials are used daily by researchers throughout LANL's Weapons Program as well as researchers across the Nuclear Security Enterprise. Going forward, this portion of the NSRC will be known as the Charlotte Serber Center.

Who was Charlotte Serber?

Oppenheimer met Serber through her husband, Robert, who was his student turned protégé and friend. The Serbers even lived in a small apartment above the garage of the Oppenheimer's Berkeley, California home before both couples moved to Los Alamos to secretly create the first atomic bombs.

Among Oppenheimer's first recruits, the Serbers arrived in Los Alamos in March 1943, according to *Their Day in the Sun*. While her husband focused on physics, Serber filled library shelves with materials that were first mailed circuitously around the country to avoid suspicion and oversaw the top-secret technical materials exchanged around the Lab. In the beginning, there was just one safe, which only opened if Serber kicked it while dialing the combination, she wrote in *Standing By and Making Do*.

Meanwhile, Serber learned the Dewey Decimal System library classification system and how to catalog materials – all new concepts to her as a freelance journalist following her 1933 graduation from the University of Pennsylvania. In his memoir, Robert Serber wrote that Oppenheimer saw Charlotte Serber's lack of library experience as a benefit because she would likely have fewer objections about cutting corners to hastily build a library.

As the Group Leader, she oversaw an eventual staff of 12, the thousands of materials that eventually filled the shelves, card catalogs and storage cabinets.

The highest praise and crushing disappointment

By all accounts, Serber's library was exceptionally well-run, which Oppenheimer noted in a post-war congratulatory letter he wrote to her, stating, "[No] single hour of delay has been attributed by any man in the laboratory to a malfunctioning, either in the Library or in the classified files. To this must be added the fact of the surprising success in controlling and accounting for the mass of classified information, where a single serious slip might not only have caused us the profoundest embarrassment but might have jeopardized the successful completion of our job."

Although she had earned his praise, her work did not result in equal treatment relative to her male counterparts around the Lab. Serber was the Lab's only Group leader not invited to witness the first-ever detonation of the atomic bomb – the Trinity test – in the Los Alamos desert on July

16, 1945. Oppenheimer said she was excluded because there were no sanitary facilities at the site. She was offended.

After the war and today

With the war's end, the Serbers returned to Berkeley. Charlotte sought a librarian position at the Berkeley Radiation Laboratory, but was turned away after she was denied a security clearance related to unsubstantiated communist accusations. Following World War II, the loyalties of many, including Oppenheimer himself, were questioned without merit and they suffered consequences.

By the early 1950s, the Serbers moved to New York City, where Robert worked as a professor at Columbia University and Charlotte became a production assistant for the Broadway Theatre.

Charlotte Serber died May 22, 1967. Today, the NSRC remains her legacy and, on behalf of the NSRC staff, we couldn't be more proud to commemorate that legacy with the newly minted Charlotte Serber Center.

Visuals:



https://drive.google.com/file/d/11Qv0okYgquHi4JA0VijYbq3Li_pligR5/view?usp=sharing

Charlotte Serber was the Lab's first librarian and only female Group leader during the Manhattan Project, which was the U.S. government's top-secret effort to build the first-ever nuclear weapons to help end World War II. A portion of the Lab's National Security Research Center is named after Serber, who is pictured here in her badge photo from 1943.



<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BE62CEAu5VJOwGDpsAZkLYBpM5V6nUlk/view?usp=sharing>

In just two years' time, Charlotte Serber (front row, center) built and managed a classified technical reports library that Los Alamos scientists relied upon to create the atomic bomb. Serber had no formal training or experience as a librarian, but earned the highest praise for the success of her library. (Photo from the Los Alamos Historical Society.)

TBD

Photo from dedication ceremony

National Security Research Center staff and Lab leadership honored Charlotte Serber during Women's History Month by naming a portion of the NSRC after her. The Charlotte Serber

Center houses the classified materials that Serber amassed and oversaw during World War II. They are used today by Weapons Program researchers.